

AN ECHO OF ROMANCE.

BY ALICE MAUD EWELL.

MISS STASY, Miss Belinda, Miss Patsey, Miss Liza, Miss Chloe, and Miss Susannah, they were called. Six maiden ladies of uncertain age, living all together in the house where they were born; and not one of the six had, to her certain undoubted knowledge, ever had a lover.

Most sad and strange and humiliating fact! Most humiliating of all facts in connection with a woman—as considered by ninetynine other women out of a hundred. And why this fact existed in their case is the first question that arises. Were they hideously ugly, or hopelessly stupid, or prudes, or frigid saints? Had they never known any men? Yet, indeed, there were none of these reasons. They were not ugly. Miss Stasy had been remarkably pretty, Miss Susannah was very handsome, the other four comely enough. They had their fair share of wit, they had occasionally seen a man; but, lacking apparently that peculiar attractiveness for mankind which many ugly, silly, or even prudish women have been known to possess, the truth remains as I have said: they had never had any lovers.

They lived in an old-fashioned spread-out mansion, with high-sloping shingled roof, wide red-brick chimneys, small many-paned windows, and two generous sheltering porches, front and back. It stood on a gently-rising hillock, with clustering shade-trees around, and commanded a peaceful smiling view of Virginia hills and vales. In this house the Misses Bobbinett were born while it was counted new and smart, and, with its timbers and brickwork, its mossy roof and weather-stained walls, they had grown old. They were young girls in the early days of this our nineteenth century, and, during its first stirring vigorous half, they faded and grew soberly middle-aged—unsought, unwooed.

And what was the reason? some modern sister may ask again. And, if I begin to make excuses for their failure, where will they end—and will they be sufficient, after all—I wonder? Old Mr. Toplift Bobbinett, their father, was not only unsocial, but proud as Lucifer. Whatever the traditional greatness of the Bobbinett family may have been founded upon, I know not; but that it was very grand indeed, we may be sure:

too grand for mixing with any but the equally high “quality-folks,” who lived, unluckily, ten, fifteen, or twenty miles away—a fact which did not allow of much visiting. There were two or three long journeys or grand receptions in a year; there was an equally stiff and guarded attendance at church once a month, when the six maidens were demurely ushered into their pew by the prim old gentleman, who followed them out after sermon straight to the carriage, like driving a string of geese to their coop. What chance was there for innocent talk or captivating glances? What availed their true and tender hearts, their good health, industry, modesty, liveliness, among themselves—all these attractions—when eclipsed by Miss Gambol’s free romping way, Miss Loveall’s alluring smiles, Miss Mantrapp’s winning tricks? The Misses Bobbinett, said the young gentlemen, were good-looking enough, and good-natured, and perfect gentlewomen, as nobody could deny, but—And, as they always hesitated for the right word, we will supply it and say “inaccessible.” So the Misses Bobbinett were admired at a distance or formally visited now and then, while Miss Gambol, Miss Loveall, and their like, had lovers in plenty and made fine matches when scarce out of their teens.

At the county balls, held in the court-house town twice a year, whether they went with papa for escort, arrayed in India muslins, with skirts a yard wide and waists just under their armpits, with lace tuckers and quaint jeweled ornaments here and there, with brown or black or yellow hair done up in high topknots and curled over white foreheads, not unlike the present fashion—at these famous balls, the Misses Bobbinett were admired and did not want for partners; but no romantic consequences followed. The six sisters went home, not pursued by adoring gallants, but jogging placidly in their big carriage, with papa on horseback alongside, well contented and talking good-humoredly—and, I verily believe, quite unconscious of any failure.

They had no brothers to bring friends to the house, no handsome young male cousins to flirt with, poor things, very much to papa’s peace of mind; for he wanted his girls single all around him in his old-age, and had, besides, a shy morbid horror of lovers and love-making.

The black people, with the respectful familiarity of old slave-times, were wont to make sly allusions to the fine sweethearts and rich husbands that must one day come; whereat Miss Stacy would laugh, and Miss Susannah blush, and blunt Miss Chloe cry "Pehaw!" and airy Patsey toss her curly head; but still none were really displeased, and, though in no hurry and quite easy on that score, all were happily conscious of such possibilities some day. But, as time passed on, with no triumphs or suitors, these innocent jokes became rarer. The old aunts and mammies grew sore and hopeless and even bitter on the subject. Had they not a right to expect glimpses of romance, lovers' transports, broken hearts by the dozen, besides at least six steady courtships, six weddings with grand dresses, eating, and drinking to brag of? To be sure! There was much talk against the "fool men" whose lack of due appreciation had done them this wrong, much abusing of "ole marster," and general bewailing of their young ladies' virginity—though strictly in private, be it said, for never once to any outsider would any of the Bobbinett people have hinted at this disappointment. They grew hard and bitter against the male sex. They developed the most violent admiration for celibacy, and dwelt on the evils that married people had brought into the world, from Adam and Eve down; and, whenever weddings were talked of, they publicly thanked their stars that their mistresses had kindly spared them any such trouble in the household.

But the Ladies Bobbinett made no such brave pretenses. They never spoke willingly of lovers and love-affairs; they received all such news or the occasional confidings of their young friends with a sort of shy grave diffidence. It was not that they were soured past all such sympathy—no, no! but they knew nothing about it. They had no such sweet experience to live over again with the younger generations. There was a sense of loss, of imperfectly-developed existence, that came over them here; and they liked to forget it, but could not quite, even when the fairer gladder contrast was not thrust upon them. With each other, the subject was ignored, except when blunt outspoken Miss Chloe must needs say her say.

"The girl's a simpleton," she cried, on one of these occasions, speaking of a neighborhood wedding just come to pass. "She'll know no more about taking care of her first baby than she knows now about mending her husband's stockings or setting out a decent dinner. But what difference did that make to the man when he fancied her? A pretty wife and mother

she'll make—the fly-away silly thing! Lord save us! I've seen some poor creatures in the married state—and all of us six left single, high and dry. There was Betty Topnott, that died when her first child was born; and Polly Gambol, who ran off and left hers—half a dozen of 'em—to shift for themselves like so many kittens. I'd not have died, if it had been me; and I'd surely, surely not have run away. I might have been the mother of five sons, and done my duty by 'em too—as all of you the same, if there'd ever been a fair chance. But the lazy and the sickly, the fools and the scatter-brains, were the ones to be courted and married, and here we are now—that were as likely girls as you'll find in a month o' Sundays, and not wanting sense neither—here we are, old maids that nobody wanted, going down into the ground just as we came out of it, with never a chick or child to leave behind us."

At this, the Misses Bobbinett said: "La, sister!" or "Goodness alive, Chloe, how you talk!" and placid Miss Stacy looked over her spectacles, and squeamish Miss Liza blushed as red as a peony. Miss Chloe, at sixty, was tall, thin, and angular, with a stern eye and a determined face and gestures—a tout ensemble rather oddly contrasting with the narrow skirt and short infant-waist which she wore always, in the fashion of her youth. Miss Susannah, the youngest of the family, at forty-five, kept well up to the prevailing mode in dress, in a decorous elderly style, and the others made various concessions in the way of flounces, plaited bodies, and "long shorts"; but Miss Chloe would not change. In this rather peculiar garb, stepping briskly around in her general oversight of household, garden, and dairy, cracking some idle or saucy little darky, or even the grown-up ones, for that matter, over the pate with her stick—it was hard to connect the idea of romantic feminine yearnings with Miss Chloe; but, as we all know, appearances are sometimes deceitful, and it isn't always the prettiest young outside that covers the warmest heart, however much we may insist that it ought to be.

One day, not long after her forty-fifth birthday, Miss Susannah Bobbinett got a letter. This was a rare occurrence in the family, and more than one pair of eyes she felt upon her as she opened it. The envelope was large and square, the direction in a precise, business-like, masculine hand. Tearing it open with nervous haste, Miss Susannah drew out two papers, one newly written with very black ink in the same plain well-defined characters, the other folded inside of it, yellow, creased, and time-worn. She read the first with a

dazed air, like one who but half saw or felt the paper between her fingers, and then as if in sore bewilderment turned to the others. Let us look over her shoulder and read both.

The old yellow letter was in a straggling, tremulous, boyish hand, and dated twenty-five years back. Here it is in full:

"FAIR AND HONOURED MADAME: Think not, because I address you thus, by the cold and formal conveyance of written speech, that the heart which dictates these words is one whit less warm and adoring than if the same had rushed in their first ardor from my trembling lips last night, when your lily-white hand touched my own, your beauteous eyes met mine, glance to glance, so bewitchingly upraised in the mazy involutions of the dance. Ah! Thou beauteous lovely one! what was the musick that our steps so fleetly followed, compared to the far sweeter musick of thy voice? It is but three words I would have you speak in that sweetest of earth's tones to me. Dare I hope that you will grant my prayer—return my adoration, even in the one thousandth part? Dare I hope and think that it was some shade of preference for me—even me—that brightened those sparkling eyes, mantled in those rosy-coloured cheeks, when we danced together last night? Or was it only that heavenly beaming kindness that all alike may share? My tongue would falter, my heart fail, in asking this all-important question face to face. How could I endure a cold disavowal of affection, in presence of those charms that have inspired my passion? Oh! admired Miss Bobbinet! If you can return my love, if you can be mine—nay, even far less, if after reading this perchance over-bold letter you do not regard me with aversion—bethink you how one line through the earliest post will raise him who loves you to the seventh heaven of joy—how the contrary neglect and omission will sink him into Purgatory direr than any that Catholick ever prayed rescue from. Not even as I am now, overwrought with the sleeplessness, the excitation, of last night, can I rest in mind or body without putting my fate to the touch. May I at least indulge myself in the idea that I am not hateful to you—and that the friendly favor, if not the love, of that sweetest kindest heart will dictate an early answer to your devoted slave and would-be lover,

WILLIAM GRAYLING."

Here was a love-letter, sure enough, such as Miss Susannah had never received before; and, despite its old-fashioned stiltedness, right from the middle of an ardent young heart. And here is the other—postscript and introduction—which explained the lateness of its coming:

"MISS SUSANNAH BOBBINETT.

"Dear Madame: I find the enclosed letter among my most precious relics of the time when it was written, and, as the sentiment which it breathes is still unchanged—despite that long silence and apparent forgetfulness which may argue the contrary—I send it herewith, thinking it perhaps the best recommendation of this, my present suit, that could be brought under your notice. The sudden and most distressing death of my father was what at first prevented the sending of that letter; a most unlooked-for change in circumstances, that sent me penniless and well-nigh friendless away to that distant part of the country where I have since lived and labored, deferred the expression of hopes and wishes such as it contained till too late, as I long believed. However, but lately returned to my native town, I find that you are still unmarried, contrary to what I feared and expected. If this communication, taken with what was written twenty-five years ago, commends to you an affection at least constant and unchanging, let me add that I shall still account it the greatest honor and privilege to place at your disposal my heart, hand, and the competency wherewith Heaven has rewarded my efforts. I wait with anxiety your answer, dear madame, and hope that it will be favorable, at least in so far as to allow me the pleasure of a speedy interview; meanwhile remaining your obedient servant and friend,

WILLIAM GRAYLING."

William Grayling! As a star reveals itself, clearly, luminously, out of twilight dimness, there came to Miss Susannah, when she recognized the name, the memory of a handsome, shy-eyed, boyish face, glowingly bent toward her, of a slim graceful figure, of two strong, warm, eager young hands meeting and clasping her own in the turns and motions of the dance. Glancing again at the date of that first letter, she remembered the ball one summer moonlit night; and how she had danced with William Grayling more than twice or thrice; and how he had muttered a little strangely at parting, something about "when they met again"; and how his father had dropped dead in the street of the court-house town, next morning, leaving nothing but a mass of debt and ruin to his family; and how the son had gone away in less than a fortnight, with his penniless mother and sisters, to seek a living for himself and them in the far-off busy city of New Orleans. Very little had the county-folk heard of him since then, beyond a vague rumor now and then that he was doing well. No wonder that they had well-nigh forgotten

him, Miss Susannah among the rest! Yes—let the humiliating fact be told—she had almost forgotten him. But then she had not known that he loved her.

"Well, well!" broke in Miss Chloe's voice, impatiently, like a stiff nor'west breeze blowing through the haze of Miss Susannah's astonishment. "Who's the letter from, and what for are you staring so?"

Miss Susannah blushed red all over her plump, comely, middle-aged face.

"It—it's only from a—gentleman, sister," she said, nervously.

"Humph! Only a gentleman, indeed! We hear from so many gentlemen—don't we? What in the name of sense—Here—let me see!"

Miss Chloe reached out her hand; the other sisters laid down their knitting-work and opened their eyes. It was a trying moment to Miss Susannah. She handed the fresh new letter—that concise businesslike communication—to her sisters without demur; but, when Miss Chloe had read it, with dawning amazement on her countenance, and reached out for the other, as a matter of course, Miss Susannah drew back and slipped it under her apron with an unusually resolute air.

"You can't see that, sister; it's mine," said she. "I can't show that to—to anybody."

Miss Chloe stared at her hard.

"Upon my soul!" said she. "You can't! Mighty coy and secret, for an old maid 'most fifty years old. What does he say in it, pray, if you're not too bashful to tell?"

Miss Susannah turned redder than before, and cleared her throat more than once.

"He says," she began, quaveringly, "he says that he loves—that is, that he prefers—I mean, that he is very much attached to me, then and now. I think—that is, I'm not sure—but I think that he wants to marry me."

Miss Chloe, Miss Stasy, Miss Belinda, Miss Liza, and Miss Patsey said not a word; but they looked at Miss Susannah and then at each other in a curious sort of way, as if they hardly knew whether to laugh or cry, and then at Miss Susannah again. She felt herself admired and respected as never before, and she bore her triumph meekly—but it was sweet.

"Well!" spoke up Miss Chloe, presently, drawing a deep long breath. "There's one sensible man in the world, at any rate! William Grayling! Hump! I always liked William—he was a nice-behaved boy. And did you ever have a notion before that he was fond of you in particular?"

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"La, sisters! how can I tell?" cried Miss Susannah, feeling by this time rather doubtful on that score, though in reality she had never guessed it at all. "I knew he liked me very well; but there were plenty that did that, you know."

"Oh, yes," said Miss Chloe, dryly; "plenty that liked us after a fashion. Mighty civil, some of 'em were. Now, this is different—something worth talking about. You'll sit right down and answer that, of course. The post goes up to town this evening, and he'll get the letter then and there. Why, law, girls! maybe he's pacing round, on the tenter-hooks, waiting for it now; and he can just drive right down, first thing to-morrow morning."

Miss Chloe, Miss Stasy, Miss Patsey, Miss Liza, and Miss Belinda, all began with one accord to bustle about, seeking pen, ink, and paper; but poor Miss Susannah sat helpless, in unaffected hesitation.

"Mercy, Chloe!" she cried, piteously, "what will I write, and what's the use of it, anyway? How do I know that he'd better come at all? It's been twenty-five years since that letter was written. I'm not the same that I was then. How do I know if he'll want me, after all?"

"Then he'll be a simpleton—and worse—after sending it now!" snapped Miss Chloe, looking vengeance at the thought. "Don't you be a born goose, Susannah! There's not many women of your age as good-looking as you."

But Miss Susannah had still another objection to make.

"But how do I know if he'll suit me?" she ventured, trembling. "It's been a long time, Chloe. He mightn't be like the same William that we knew. I don't want to be contrary—but, indeed, sister, if he is very fat and red-faced, with a great big stomach and bald head, or if he is very dried-up and wanzened, as they say the people in the South are so apt to be at his age—"

"You Susannah Bobbinett!" cried Miss Chloe, in a terrible voice, "if you go flying in the face of Providence that way—and this our first offer, and you 'most fifty years old—if you go putting on any such airs as that, I'll swear you're the biggest fool that ever walked this earth."

Miss Susannah read her two letters over again, and pondered them in her heart. A mere offer of marriage from a commonplace elderly gentleman held nothing very tempting for her at this late day. She had not wanted to marry—not that at all; but that absurd boyish avowal of young lover's love, written so many years ago and now embalmed with such sweet odors of con-

stancy—that was what appealed to Miss Susannah's inmost soul, to the heart of romance-loving femininity which eighty frequently shares in common with eighteen. This was what she had vaguely yearned for and missed. Why, it was like going back unexpectedly and finding oneself a girl again: and what woman ever grows too old to enjoy that sensation?

She wrote the letter in time—a very short and exceedingly proper invitation for Mr. William Grayling to visit her the next evening; and this she sent by the post.

The next day seemed, to Miss Susannah, the very strangest day that ever she had spent. The other Misses Bobbinett were vastly busy, one and all, preparing for the expected guest, polishing what already shone, and putting to rights what had never been out of order; but, in reply to Miss Susannah's offers of help, they would tell her with mysterious nods and winks and smiles that it wasn't at all necessary—oh, dear, no!—and that she had better go sit in the parlor, or walk in the garden, or lie down and take a nap, for all the world as if she were a bride on the eve of her wedding: whereat poor Miss Susannah, feeling quite overcome by the sense of sudden value and importance that had come upon her, and being too restless to keep still one single minute, wandered about like a troubled spirit and knew not what to be at. She caught the others looking at her, as if they had somehow never seen her before; and, to add to the nervous feeling that this gave her, she felt sure that the servants knew perfectly well what had happened and was going to happen. Did they not peep at her through doorways and windows? and gather, darkly whispering, in corners? and rush around distractedly, as if half out of their wits with joyful excitement? Did not old Mammy Dinah—toothless, bent double, as she was, and ninety years old at the least—did not she sing shrilly from her chimney-corner all day long:

"Oh, yander come my true love! Oh, how do you do?
An' how has you been since I parted from you?"

And the ditty was appreciatively echoed and re-echoed by all the rest. Miss Susannah, wondering vaguely how they knew, did not guess how the five other Misses Bobbinett had each imparted the secret in confidence to her own particular favorite among the house-people, who, in their turn, had hastened to tell each other and all the rest of the darkies on the land—big and little, old and young.

But the excitement reached its height when Miss Stasy brought triumphantly forth from some chest or closet, where it had been laid

away these twenty years, the very same white muslin dress that Miss Susannah had worn at that now momentous ball. She was resolved on Miss Susannah wearing it again to-day. Why shouldn't she? they all said. It could be "done up," dried, and ironed in less than an hour; it would look as well as ever with some of the same kind of flowers that she had worn that night in her hair. Was it pink roses or honeysuckle that Sukey had worn, that night? they asked each other. Damask roses—ah, yes! how lucky that they were in bloom just now! Why, it was the very same time of the year, to be sure; and the dress and the flowers should go together once more. The sisters, carried away by this highly romantic idea, saw nothing absurd in it; but Miss Susannah was still sane enough to perceive that a muslin dress, low-necked and short-sleeved, with a short beruffled skirt and infant-waist, was not exactly suited to a person like herself, fat and forty-five, however fair she might still be. A dove-colored merino, with a sober lace collar and breastpin—and, maybe, a modest blue-ribbon bow—was, she contended, more suitable; and, despite all protests, in this wise she arrayed herself when the trying hour drew near.

It came at last, the time when Mr. William Grayling might at any moment be expected to arrive, about five o'clock on a June evening, with the most bewitching sunshine everywhere cut-of-doors, the most delightful expectation within. The Misses Bobbinett were in their best gowns, bibs, and tuckers, and in a state of suppressed excitement, which, I verily believe, would have been dangerous had it lasted much longer. The best gold-and-blue flowered china was already on the tea-table, the best silver teapot shining, the best quince and pear preserves in the best cut-glass dishes. The parlor was swept, and garnished with those damask roses that Miss Susannah had rejected, in every vase, on every shelf and table, with pinks and honeysuckle and wall-flowers besides. Aunt Venus, the head-cook, was beating biscuit-dough—bump! bump!—with all her might; Liza Ann, the dining-room girl, was capping strawberries; her mother fetching up cream from the spring-house; and old Mammy Dinah still humming, from her chimney-corner, with decorous lowness of pitch:

"Oh, yander come my true love! Oh, how do you do?
An' how has you been since I parted from you?"

Well, at last he came. I am sure that the Misses Bobbinett would not have been at all surprised, to see him come prancing up on a snow-white horse, with plumes in his knightly helmet. Maybe they were a bit disappointed

at first sight of the sober, stout, middle-aged gentleman, who came driving himself in a gig, with a brown horse too fat to have essayed one single prance, even if it had wanted to. But it was a very pleasant-faced gentleman, after all, with a complexion not very red and eyes clear as a boy's, despite the anxious wrinkle between the brows above them, with a gray mustache, and very nice white hands, and the very best fitting clothes on that the Misses Bobbinett had ever seen.

Miss Susannah was standing on the front porch when he came up the walk, having been dexterously shoved out into this position from behind. Mr. William Grayling colored furiously at sight of her, and pulled off his driving-gloves with hasty nervous fingers.

"Good-evening," said Miss Susannah, rather stiffly, being dreadfully conscious that everybody in the house was listening through cracks and around corners to every word. "Good-evening —ahem—Mr. William."

The stout elderly gentleman took one long attentive look at her, then he dropped both his gloves on the step, came briskly forward, seized Miss Susannah's two fat white hands in his, and said:

"God bless you, my dear! God bless you!"

Then, to her great distress, he was actually going to kiss her right in the mouth then and there, but Miss Susannah drew back with the strength of desperation. "Wait a minute, please," said the poor lady, distinctly, but drawing her breath hard. "Don't do anything that you might be sorry for. Look at me again—there. Take your time—all around, so! You see, I'm not the same girl that you danced with and wrote that letter to, twenty-five years ago."

"Of course not, my dear. Of course not," said Mr. Grayling, looking as he was bidden at Miss Susannah, as she turned herself from side to side; looking very gravely, but with a twinkle in his eye. "You're not the same girl, but you're the same woman, my dear Susannah."

Now, whether Miss Susannah was offended at his agreeing so readily that she was not a girl, I know not. Her next remark was a little cruel:

"And you—you are not the same, either—as well as I recollect," she said.

Mr. Grayling looked down at the gently swelling rotundity of his figure. "Not the same youngster, of course, of course," he said, "and a little over-sized for dancing. However, we can get along without that, can't we? Ah! I've had a hard time in this world, my dear. Not meaning to complain—still, I've had a right hard, dreary, jog-trot life of it. But I've kept

you in mind, and thought a heap of you through it all; and, now that I'm able to do as I like, I've come back to you, first thing. I'm not so young as I was, sure enough; but neither are you, if I may say so. A half a loaf is better than no bread—and I think we may as well eat our half loaf together, if you are willing. Such as I am, I'm at your service. Will you have me?"

He took her plump hands again in both of his. Miss Susannah's face became very red, then pale; but, with the consciousness of all those listening ears hard by, she could not utter one word. And, while she was standing thus speechless, looking bashfully down, Miss Chloe came bouncing out of the doorway behind her. She could listen in silence no longer.

"You Susannah Bobbinett!" she cried, in tones that suggested a box on the ear the next moment. "If you don't say 'yes' this very minute, and leave off that shilly-shally fooling—for all the world like a girl in her teens—I'll turn you right out of this house."

Miss Susannah became Mrs. William Grayling in less than three months, and mistress of the handsomest establishment in the county, near enough to her sisters to see them any and every day she liked. Mr. Grayling's "competence" turned out to be a handsome fortune; he was an excellent match in more ways than one, and not a few damsels on the sunny side of forty wondered and sighed that he had chosen in such a hurry an undoubted spinster like Miss Susannah.

It was noticeable that the Ladies Bobbinett after this time always talked of love-affairs in a free, flowing, confident way, that argued stores of experience in such matters. Indeed, there is no telling what a pleasant mellow light this discovery of Mr. Grayling's attachment reflected throughout all their being. It was not the marriage that pleased them most, though that was something to be proud of, too; it was the romance infinitely suggestive of a similar "might have been" for each one of them. Suppose William Grayling had died—they sometimes thought—or had fallen in love with somebody else, or had never made money enough to come back—why, then Miss Susannah would never have known about that letter. Other people had gone away, and died or been less fortunate in life. There was no knowing, and never could be, what secret hopes had been cherished, what young hearts had pined—or for whom.

This idea was enough to keep feminine fancy pleasantly astir for the rest of their lives.

A MODERN PETRUCHIO.

BY OLIVIA LOVELL WILSON, AUTHOR OF "A LEGAL FETTER," "LUCK OF ASHMBAD," "A KNIGHT OF THE GARTER," ETC.

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PART II.—WON! CHAPTER IV.



UTH MYRICK stood for a moment, trembling and silent. One glance into the boyish face bent toward her, full of his hopeful love, was like glancing into a mirror of truth, wherein she saw her own ugly conduct reflected in a clear light. The tenderness in his honest eyes smote on her awakening conscience, and she shrank back in dismay.

Then that evil portion of her nature reasserted itself. It rebelled at the call of conscience, and she gathered her scattered forces, and grew cold and hard.

"I scarcely understand you, Mr. Owen," she said, lifting her eyes to his face: "do you intend this as an offer of marriage?"

Her words were well chosen. They recalled him forcibly to the fact of his poverty. He stammered as he replied:

"I—I—mean that I love you passionately, devotedly, and no task would be too great for me to accomplish, in order to win you."

She turned away then, and, looking into the fire, laughed softly.

"Do you realize what winning me involves? I am an expensive luxury. Your salary would not keep me in gloves!"

He gave her a wondering glance, but he would not understand yet what such a reception of his earnest avowal portended.

"I realize I cannot live without you," he exclaimed, with the vehemence of youth. "I will toil for years; I will serve as Jacob served for Rachel, if you but give me one word of hope. I can wait with patience."

"But I cannot. I hate to be patient," she said, a little sharply. "Do you not remember, 'hope deferred maketh the heart sick'?"

"Then you do love me enough to be impatient," cried this stupid lover, his face growing radiant. She bit her lip in vexation, and spoke curtly:

"I do not love you at all. I am reminded of

an old nursery rhyme, in which the little maiden asks 'What should we have to eat?' Will the flame you're so rich in make a fire in the kitchen, and the god of love turn the spit?'" She repeated the lines gracefully with a weary gesture, in which a faint scorn was perceptible. His face grew white as he understood her careless words, and realized all they meant. A less youthful lover would long before have known by her self-possession how little she cared to spare him.

"You mean—" he began, slowly.

"I mean, when I marry, it will be someone older and richer than yourself, and may I add—wiser."

She spoke softly, looking away from him.

He put his hand over his eyes, and groaned: "What a fool I have been!" Then bent on her his glance, burning with a strange light. "The day may come," he said, "when you will be sorry for the words spoken to-night—when you will bid me forget them. I pray heaven it may be so, and that you will see yourself as I see you now. I have been foolish, stupid, these past weeks, not to perceive that you were using me as your dupe; but love blinded my eyes. Heaven grant you may still learn your folly, as I have tasted bitterly of mine, and grow to be the lovely woman God made you. instead of the creature you now appear—untruthful in act and word; dishonorable—a vain coquette."

She shrank under the vehemence of his words. No one had ever dared address her thus before. He seemed to snatch the veil from her self-conceit, and she saw herself as he pictured her. And, with this terrible sense of dishonor, awoke the wild desire for his esteem. What could she say in her own defense? She was so little used to acknowledging herself wrong, that the pain and anxiety called forth by his words spent themselves in an apparent outburst of anger.

"Mr. Owen—Laurence—how dare you speak to me in this way?"

"What would I not dare, to replace you in the shrine from which this hour's work has cast you out!" he cried, with a repressed passion that shook him from head to foot. "Oh, I cannot

even now believe it is your real self that has done this thing. Ruth, Ruth, even to bless some other man, live to be a nobler woman. God made you fair—be true as well! I never wish to look in your face again! You have scorned and destroyed my love, yet if at any time you will by one word express sorrow for this—"

"I express sorrow—I regret this decision!" Ruth was once more proudly erect. "Mr. Owen, you presume! It is growing late," pointing to the clock. "You have prolonged this interview past the limit of my patience. Good-night—I hope daylight will bring you to a better frame of mind."

He turned to depart, but came back a step or two, and stood looking at her, his face white with pain. She did not move; but her glance fell beneath his. One of her long gloves lay on the carpet, where it had fallen. He bent, picked it up, and kissed the glove, still warm with the impression of her hand: then he laid it on the table and quietly left her.

For a moment, she stood still and cold; then she moved forward, impulsively stretching her hands toward the door.

"Laurence! Laurence!" she called. But the outer door closed. "Laurence!" she called again. But this time her voice sank to a whisper.

She walked to the table, snatched the glove, and pressed it to her lips, then sank into a chair, weeping passionately and pressing against her cheek the glove that had felt his caress.

Thus Ruth Myrick won her wager.

CHAPTER V.

WITH wise forbearance, Kate Gifford restrained from questioning Ruth on the result of her wager, when she saw, the following morning, that her friend's face betrayed a sleepless night. She was rather pettish and restless all the morning.

Kate had made an engagement to go with her lover to the old homestead, "Elland," and she begged Ruth to accompany them. Ruth accepted the invitation, feeling there was little chance of Captain Leland's calling to divert her, and reluctant to be left to her own sad thoughts. Brompton and South Walsingham were within driving-distance, and "Elland," the Morris homestead, was on the road between the two places.

When Eric's father married the fashionable Mrs. Gifford as his second wife, he left the pleasant old country-seat and moved to South Walsingham. The homestead had been named

"Elland" for Eric's mother, who had lived there all her married life. Eric, in the course of natural inheritance, should at least have had "Elland"; but, owing to "family jars," not the least of which was occasioned by Eric's love for his stepsister, Katherine Gifford, his father had left him penniless. Eric wished once more to visit the old home. He had a horror of his father's widow transforming the dear old place, if she ever took possession of it, and a still greater dread that she might sell it; for it had no agreeable recollections for her.

Eric was a little disappointed when he found Rue was to accompany them in their drive. He had looked forward to a tête-à-tête with Kate, and he had reason to feel vexed with Rue. But, of course, he betrayed no chagrin at the addition to their party.

The day was warm and balmy, April having donned a smile in their favor. Rue was so quiet, that Eric finally chid her laughingly, as they spun along the road behind the spirited steeds.

"Where did you get these horses, Eric?" she asked, without heeding him. "They are finer than Captain Leland's bays."

"A compliment from your lips, I presume," he said. "These are the horses of Miss Jean Owen, Larry's aunt. She drove from South Walsingham to-day, to see me on business, and, finding I wanted to go to Elland, offered me the horses. She stays overnight in Brompton, so the horses will only get sufficient exercise. She is a charming old lady, I assure you."

"Does she drive them herself?" Rue inquired.

"You would not ask that if you knew Miss Jean. I did not want Barney's services—I enjoy driving such a pair."

"What an Irish lot they are!" said Ruth, disdainfully. "Irish servants! and I presume even the horses are from 'ould Erin.' Has Miss Jean a strong brogue, like our friend Larry?"

Now, Eric had learned enough from Laurence, the night before, to render this speech very disagreeable to him, even if Ruth had not outraged good-breeding in making such a remark. His eyes flashed, as he replied:

"They are so Irish, that they never make ill-bred remarks regarding their neighbors, no matter how richly the latter may deserve such criticism."

"Oh, Eric!" Kate said, gently.

And Eric was thus reminded that he had only used the same blunt weapon wielded by Ruth. He said hastily:

"I beg your pardon, Ruth—I was very rude."

"I deserved your rebuke," was the meek

reply, "for speaking so of your friends. It was unpardonable rudeness on my part."

And Kate saw that tears were in Rue's lovely eyes, and so rallied to the rescue.

"What miracle is this?" she said, lightly.

"Rue and Eric both humble!"

Her lover laughed, with a fond glance at her sweet face.

"Eric, let me take the reins," cried Rue; "I must do something wild and delightful."

"Come, then." And Eric drew in the horses, while he helped Rue to her place at his side and gave her the reins.

Kate sat breathless the remainder of the drive; for Rue handled the reins skillfully, and the horses dashed over the road as if her restless spirit communicated itself to them, yet they were attentive to her slightest word.

Her gloves were sadly split when they arrived at Elland; but she was in rare spirits, and stood caressing the horses; while they looked at her with intelligent eyes, knowing she loved them.

"I am glad we have all our bones whole," sighed Kate.

"I do not believe Rue has more than a remnant of her gloves left. For all that, she is a gay little Amazon," said Eric. "Who taught you to drive, Rue?"

"Captain Leland," she replied. "And, as for the gloves—"

"No matter. You won a pair last night," Eric interrupted.

The color flamed over Ruth's face; but she made no answer, remaining by the horses, while Kate and Eric proceeded to the house.

"I have not mentioned the wager," said Kate. "I am sorry you referred to it, for she is very sore over whatever occurred last evening."

"You are too compassionate—you judge others by your own gentle heart. She refused him scornfully, after leading him on with cruel determination. Larry came to the hotel, last night; he did not say much; but I could see that the discovery of her unworthiness wounded him as deeply as her lack of love. Her gloves have cost her very dear. May she enjoy them! Had you seen Larry's face, last night, you would share my indignation."

"Poor boy—I am very sorry for him," said Kate, sadly. "He will not wear the willow long—he is made of sterner stuff. Well, Rue," as she came toward them, carrying a long peach-switch she had picked up, "what have you found?"

"A reminiscence of your childhood, I fancy," she replied, tapping him lightly over the shoulder.

Eric laughed, and they went indoors.

They explored the old house reverently and somewhat sadly. Ruth turned away when they reached the room wherein hung the picture of Eric's mother, his only inheritance from this large estate.

Eric stood gazing at the portrait until it grew dim before his sight.

"If it were only something I could carry with me," he sighed, as Kate gently pushed her hand in his; "but I have nothing. Sometimes I am tempted to beg Mrs. Morris for the little jeweled pin my mother wears in that picture. I remember it so well."

He paused, his voice shaken.

"If it were only not my mother who is behaving so cruelly," said Kate, pathetically.

"Why, dear heart, you cannot help that! Promise me, dearest, that you will look after this picture, my only inheritance. Mr. Myrick thinks Mrs. Morris will never give up Elland. I sincerely hope the old place may not be sold. Will you, if any such emergency should arise, guard my one treasure—this picture?"

"You intend to leave it here, then?"

"I do not care to remove it; at any rate, until the estate is settled—which, according to Mr. Myrick, will take a year or more. He could give me permission to have it at once. But I have no place to put it; and, since I hope to return before your mother has a chance to have her will of all the property, I shall leave it here. Besides, Kate, I have very strange uncharitable suspicions regarding our executor."

"Mr. Myrick?" almost whispered Kate, in awe.

He bowed his head in assent, and, after an instant's silence, continued:

"I am positive my father made a second will, in which he remembered me liberally."

"Eric! you do not suspect mamma of—"

"No. Don't be indignant, Kate. I do not trust your mother much; but I trust Mr. Myrick less."

"Eric, you are becoming morbid from dwelling on this fancy. Your father trusted Mr. Myrick implicitly."

"I know it. But my father told me he meant to make a second will, and begged me to say nothing about it. In his last illness, he seemed afraid of Myrick; and I always believed, in spite of his smooth manner, that Myrick would work against me if it favored his interests. Now look at it: the first will leaves him a goodly legacy; doubtless, the second one leaves me the property. I was so positive of a second will, that I have searched every desk and pigeon-hole. Furthermore, my father kept trying to tell me

something in that hour before his death, and murmured mother's name over and over again."

"Do you think Mr. Myrick would dare to suppress a later will?"

"I scarcely know what to think. But of this I am certain—the legacy left Myrick by father is all that saves him from financial ruin. He has been speculating rashly. He has tried to keep it very quiet, but I know the Owen estate holds a heavy mortgage on his house and furniture. This money comes in the very nick of time to save him."

"Oh, dear! I am so tired of property. I would willingly only own my shoe-laces! It is a constant vexation," sighed Kate, tearfully.

"There, my dear! do not cloud those sweet eyes with tears. Let me show you what rewarded my search for the will." Eric drew from his pocket a paper, in which was folded a little ringlet of sunny hair, and under it was written: "Eric's first curl, March 13, 18—, Elland."

Kate was delighted.

"It is like a message of your mother's affection, Eric. Let us forget all vexing thoughts, and remember only that love is still pure and true."

"Agreed, Kate, my own." She gave him a happy smile, and said: "Now let us go back to Rue."

The drive home was a pleasure to Rue, because she again guided the spirited horses, and did it so well that Eric grew careless, as he turned in his seat to talk to Kate.

They had entered the town, and Ruth had coaxed the horses to a gentle pace, when a lawless pig, pursued by a dog, as self-constituted guardian of the peace, dashed across the street. The horses felt a moment's nervousness on Ruth's part, and sprang forward, one of them rearing and plunging; the dog and pig became hopelessly entangled under their hoofs, with howl and grunt, and Eric caught at the reins. In another instant, they were dashing wildly up the street, Rue still retaining the lines, and tugging with all her strength. Kate, half out of her seat, was only kept from making a dangerous jump by Eric's determined hand.

Then there was an outcry. Rue thought she saw flash past her a vision of Laurence Owen; she felt a great sense of relief and safety, and then all grew black before her eyes.

CHAPTER V.

WHEN Rue came back to consciousness, she found herself lying in Eric Morris's arms in a chemist's shop, while Kate was rubbing her

temples with cologne. She once more thought she saw Laurence Owen hovering near, but she closed her eyes hastily.

"There! she will do very well now," she heard someone say, and recognized the voice of her own physician. "It was not very commendable, Miss Rue, to faint just as the danger was over. Open your eyes again, and tell us you are not in any pain."

"No—only my arms!" she said, obeying him, and glad to let her eyes rest on his wrinkled face.

"Your arms will probably be stiff and sore for some time. I wonder they are in their sockets."

"And the horses—are they hurt?"

"No, Mr. Owen here made a bold and successful dash to your rescue. They are waiting at the door for you. And now, Owen, let me examine that wrist of yours, and I notice you are limping a little."

"Oh! is he hurt?" Rue sat up suddenly, looking for Laurence; but, to the doctor's surprise, someone said:

"Mr. Owen has just gone to your office, and will see you there. He left the shop as soon as Miss Myrick recovered."

"And we—I—did not even thank him. He stopped the horses, didn't he? Where is he?" cried Rue, confused and embarrassed.

"He has gone to my office, like a sensible fellow. He does not want any thanks, I fancy," said Dr. Mills, preparing to follow him, while Eric led Rue to the carriage once more, and drove home carefully and gravely. Kate cried all the way, but Rue sat with clasped hands and compressed lips. She knew she had dismissed Laurence when, seeing his anxious face on her recovery, she had evaded his glance. He had weighed her once more, and found her wanting, even in gratitude.

Later, Eric brought word that Laurence had twisted his wrist severely, but otherwise had sustained mere flesh-wounds. He made light of his ready assistance, saying he loved the horses too well to see them so frightened. He did not even know who was in the carriage, but was assured of his aunt's safety, having just left her. Kate could scarcely believe his prompt rescue so disinterested, but it hardened Rue's heart, and she added no word to Kate's message of grateful thanks.

"He would have rescued his aunt's coachman as readily," she said, coldly, after Eric had left. "As he desires no gratitude, why should we force it upon him?"

"Rue, you are cruel." flashed Kate. "The

boy is carrying a heartache of your contriving, and you persist in misconstruing him. I believe you are without remorse."

"What do you know about my heart?" demanded Rue, turning upon her angrily. "I may be overwhelmed with regret; I may suffer a keener anguish than he has it in his nature to endure—and who shall say I do not? What does anyone care about another's conscience? How dare you judge me?" And she rushed from the apartment like a little fury, to shut herself in her bed-room, where Kate heard her stamp her foot and sob aloud.

That evening, at the dinner-table, Mr. Myrick said slowly:

"So our young friend, Laurence Owen, is to accompany Mr. Morris on this Government expedition?"

Rue looked up quickly; but Kate replied:

"I am pleased that it has been so arranged. Eric wished it very much."

"Miss Owen was in Brompton to-day, as we had a short business-conference, and she said she had determined it was best Laurence should see more of the world. What she intends to make of him, I cannot conceive. He may be wealthy at their death; but they are not old, and are close as wax besides."

"Was he not studying for the bar?"

"Yes; and would have been admitted this year, had he kept on with me. How old is he, Kate?"

"Larry is just twenty now." And Kate longed to repeat all Eric had told her regarding his heritage; but she wisely refrained, fearing to betray confidence.

Mr. Myrick called Ruth, that night, to the little room in which had transpired her scene with Laurence. Kate and Eric were in the parlor.

"Dot," he said, gravely, "Captain Leland called on me to-day."

"Well?" she asked, indifferently.

She was clad in a white gown of heavy material, that fell in soft folds, trailing over the floor. Her face was pale, and she nervously fingered a white-feather fan.

"He made a formal proposal for your hand. He said you would not be brought to face the question fairly, yet always held out hope. Is this true?"

"I endured his attentions patiently. I am a model of that virtue," she replied, giving her shoulders a slow shrug.

Her father smiled.

"Will you answer him, or shall I?"

"I should not care if I never saw his face

again," she said. "He bores me. He is insufferable."

"And Maxwell Andrews?" asked her father more anxiously.

"He is a dolt! One might use him to advertise deportment; but, marry him—"

The black brows were knitted scornfully, as she spoke.

"You little shrew!" laughed her father. "Take care, Rue—you may yet fulfill Beatrice's threat for herself and 'lead apes' in an unpleasantly warm region!"

"Better that, than lead them while on earth," she returned, sharply.

"And young Owen—you have refused him?"

She bowed her head in reply, and, at the same moment, one of the ivory sticks of her fan snapped.

"I have broken my fan. How vexatious!"

"It is easier to mend than men's hearts," laughed her father. "I suppose I must dismiss the brave captain; you have managed the rest. And here is Fanny to announce a new wooer! Kiss me, Dot, and go."

And thus their interview terminated.

But, in the ten days which passed before Eric Morris and Laurence Owen departed, Ruth Myrick held close communion with her own conscience. She was so absent-minded, that her father noted it, and watched her anxiously. He teased her a little one day, whereupon she grew very angry, and left him chuckling at having finally roused her old spirit. She was in a dozen moods in an hour, and Kate failed to keep pace with her.

During this period, she did not see Laurence Owen. Sometimes, she determined to bring about a last interview and beg him to think better of her: to show him how grateful she was for rescuing them on that eventful day; to tell him, if need be, that she would never again treat anyone as she had served him. It seemed to her, at certain moments, that she would glory in humbling herself before him now, to gain just one tender gentle glance in token of forgiveness. Then she would rebel and fight this impulse, only to yield again to a wild desire once more to hear him plead his cause and receive a kinder answer.

Perhaps, had the test really been granted at this time, she would again have been untrue to her better nature—so perverse is womankind, and so exceedingly perverse was this undisciplined little Ruth Myrick.

But the days passed on, and Laurence Owen made no sign.

At last, the day for departure came. Kate

was miserably unhappy, and Rue in secret scarcely less so. Eric would leave Brompton at seven-thirty P.M., and meet Laurence Owen at South Walsingham, where he was staying with his aunts. The young men would then go on to New York, to set sail for the Old World.

On this last day, Ruth made a sudden resolve: She would not let Laurence Owen leave without having heard one word of all she had suffered of penitence and regret.

At length, she could bear no more—she rushed to her room, and, shutting herself in, dashed off a hurried note. She dared not read it over: she wrote, with passionate fervor, the outcome of a week's silent misery. Then she found a young protégé of hers, one Con Mulligan by name, and bade him mount her own riding-horse and go at once to Miss Jean Owen's house, in South Walsingham—to give the note to no one but Mr. Laurence Owen. She promised him a goodly reward.

The boy departed in great glee.

Ruth waited in a fever of impatience. She knew there would be time for Laurence to reply or steal a few moments for a short farewell. She hoped for the latter, and started nervously at every sound. It was half-past six, and she knew Eric was with Kate, when Con returned.

She sent for him at once, and he came looking eager and complacent. He had concocted a consistent lie regarding his protracted absence and his loss of the note she entrusted to his care.

"You gave Mr. Owen the note, Con?" she asked, eagerly.

"Oh, yis, ma'am—av course I did, ma'am."

"You saw him?"

"Yis, ma'am," replied Con, relieved to find lying so easy. Sometimes, it required considerable ingenuity to elude the truth.

"Did he send a reply?"

"Niver a word, ma'am. He put it in his pocket."

"Very well, Con; you may go."

Ruth's voice had a tremulous sound, as Con bounded away, glad of his release.

The clock struck seven. Ruth counted the strokes wearily: her one hope was listening to its knell. She heard the door close on Eric, and then heard Kate come slowly up the stairs.

Ruth could not face her; she fled to her room and locked the door.

Late that same evening, as the girls sat together, Kate said suddenly:

"I forgot to tell you, Rue, what Eric told me. It is no secret now, for Miss Jean has confided it to a good many, that Larry is the heir to all Arthur Owen's property, which she and her sister have held in trust these years. His Cousin Madeline has an annuity; but the bulk of the large fortune is Larry's. He will be the wealthiest man in Barthold County, on his return."

"What do you mean?" demanded Ruth, rising and confronting Kate with a face grown very pale.

"What I have said. The money has been his all these years; but his uncle wished him kept in ignorance until—"

"Stop!" cried Rue, hoarsely. "Who knows this? Does everyone?"

"All South Walsingham and Brompton have been discussing it, the last few days. It spread like wildfire. But you seemed so indifferent to Larry's fate, that I—"

"Oh, why did you not tell me? How dared you keep me in ignorance? What have I done? What will he think—"

"Rue—what is it, my dear girl? I could not speak before. I thought it a secret. Besides, you were so cruel to Larry. What have you done, dearest? Tell me."

"I—wrote—to—him." The words were forced out between hard sobs. "I—wrote—to-day; I begged him—to come to me. I told him—I could not live—if he did not—forgive me and take back his cruel words; that I would—try and be—a better woman. And now—"

"Oh, Rue—my poor girl! My obstinate child—"

"And now—he will think—I wrote it because I had—learned of his fortune! And he still scorns me!"

It was vain for Kate to clasp in her arms the huddled sobbing girl. No word of comfort reached Ruth Myrick, in that hour in which she reaped the first fruits of the harvest she had sown. What would be the aftermath?

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

A TRUE KNIGHT.

His best deserves a knightly crest,
Who slays the evils that infest
His soul within. If victory here,

He soon will find a wider sphere;
The world is cold to him who pleads,
The world bows low to knightly deeds.